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ABSTRACT

The research and development process in the children's commercial television programming industry is examined to determine possible applications to educational research and development. The children's commercial television industry's research and development model usually consists of the following phases: research (market analysis); preliminary development; marketing; product development; production; dissemination; and evaluation. The research phase is basically non-empirical, and generally represents an assessment of market demands and network programming needs. Experts on children are sometimes, but not always, consulted. It is suggested that: (1) there is a need to research the substance of moral and social messages (overt and covert), and to define the attributes of the product which capture and hold the attention of children; (2) educational development might benefit from the style of management found in the children's commercial television industry, in which an executive producer, with both technical and managerial competence, oversees all phases of development, marketing and production; and (3) more emphasis should be placed on assessment of market, consumer and interest group wants and needs when determining the substance and type of educational products to be developed. (Author/MS)

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN COMMERCIAL TELEVISION PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

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The research and development process in the children's commercial television programming industry is examined to determine possible applications to educational R & D. The children's commercial television industry's R & D model consists of the following phases: research (market analysis); preliminary development; marketing; product development; production; dissemination; and evaluation. Deviations from the model are common. Product research consists largely of market analysis to determine marketable product attributes. Products are not fully developed until a buyer contracts for development. Emphasis is on short-term development committments. Continuity and coordination are served by participation of an executive producer, with both technical and managerial competence, in all phases of development.

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RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN COMMERCIAL TELEVISION PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

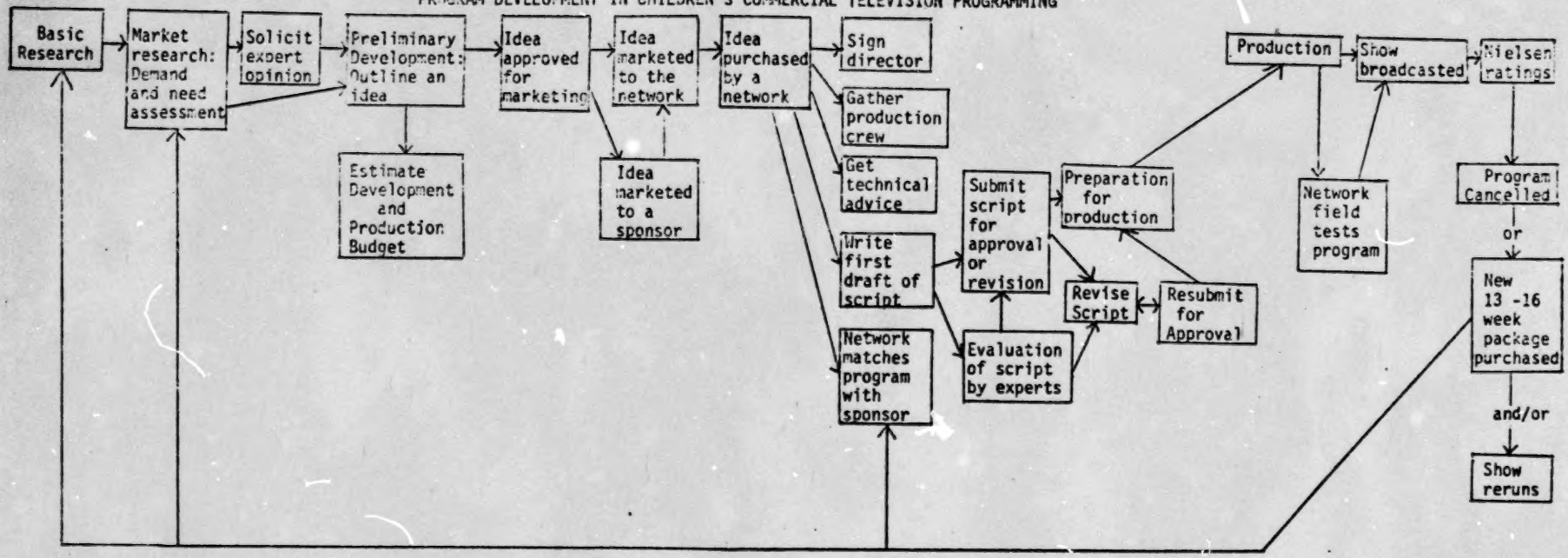
The papers presented in this symposium address the need for the educational research and development community to explore research and development (R & D) models employed by other disciplines. The investigations conducted by my colleagues into the R & D practices of the food processing industry, the chemical industry, the toy industry and the aerospace industry, and my study of the children's commercial television industry, were directed at determining which R & D practices could be applied or adapted to education.

I selected commercial television programming for children as the focus of this paper because of the common audience it shares with education. Also, they each seek to educate and capture the attention of that audience, although their priorities in this regard differ.

A summary of the main components of this television industry's "model" for research and development will be presented. This will be followed by a description of selected attributes of the model. In closing, conclusions regarding the implications of this investigation for education will be discussed.

Due to individual variation between studios, networks and production companies, no one set of procedures could be labeled as the industry's model of research and development. However, I will identify and outline a basic set of research, development and marketing procedures that a children's television program (non-animated) will generally go through from conception to airing on television, which I will refer to throughout the paper as the R & D model. The customary flow of these events is illustrated on the following page.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN"S COMMERCIAL TELEVISION PROGRAMMING



This diagram represents the general flow of events in the research,development,marketing, dissemination and evaluation of children's television programs. It does not represent a complete and comprehensive model of the R & D practices of the entire children's commercial television industry. The sequence of steps may vary and several steps may be bypassed depending upon the development agency.

The R & D model of the children's commercial television industry essentially consists of the following phases: 1) Research (Market Analysis); 2) Preliminary Development; 3) Marketing; 4) Product Development; 5) Production; 6) Dissemination; 7) Evaluation. Each program that is produced does not necessarily go through each phase that is listed nor does development always proceed in the sequence indicated.

The Research phase is basically non-empirical and generally represents an assessment of market demands and network programming needs. Attention is focused on a) network needs for competitive programming; b) interests of the target population; c) sponsor demands, such as widening the age range of the audience and enhancing the image of their product; and d) an analysis of public demands for things such as less violence, increased educational emphases, and more moral implications. Research in children's commercial television programming tends to be decision-oriented rather than conclusion-oriented. Empirical, conclusion-oriented research may be conducted, on a small scale, to examine the issue of animated versus non-animated programming.

Depending upon the type of television program to be developed and the particular organization conducting the development activity, experts such as psychologists and educators may be consulted during this phase to recommend possible program themes. They may also be asked to suggest ways of effectively conveying the theme.

The second phase generally consists of the preliminary development of an idea for a television program or series, the idea often being an outgrowth of the research activities. An outline summarizing the storyline, the main idea, the characters, and educational or moral implications, if any, is developed at this time by staff writers or independent writers.

If the writer is unknown and has few credits, a more detailed outline or the actual script may be required. Also, during this phase, the development and production budget is estimated.

After approving the outline, the executive producer must then sell the idea to one of the networks. The idea may first have to be sold to a studio or production company if the producer is employed by one. (S)he may bypass both the studio and the networks by selling the idea directly to a sponsor who will then sell the network on the idea. This would require that the executive producer have a contact with a sponsor. Occasionally a more detailed outline, called a treatment, will have to be written before a network will buy it. Studios and development companies may also begin to consider opportunities for other marketing ventures such as games, dolls, toys, t-shirts, etc. Marketing is the overriding concern during the entire R & D process.

Up to this point, little money has been spent. Development does not proceed until the idea is sold to a network who then provides the financing for the development. Therefore, if an idea is not sold, costs will be minimal.

If the network buys the idea, it usually does so in the form of a 13-16 week program package, usually representing a program series. When the program is sold, development begins. The executive producer will then sign a director, gather a production crew, hire any other needed personnel, including a producer or assistant producer, and obtain any technical advice that might be required. The writers now complete a first draft of the script. Since the primary goal is to capture and hold the attention of a wide variety of children, a basic formula for writing these scripts includes making them action-oriented with an animal in the cast. Consultants

(psychologists, educators, animal trainers, etc.) may be asked to review the first draft to determine if the subject matter is treated correctly and appropriately. Any suggestions that they provide may or may not be implemented depending upon the judgment of the executive producer and sometimes the writers. Although I have indicated that expert opinion may be solicited during the preliminary development phase, it may not be sought until now and sometimes it is not sought at all.

Before production begins, the first draft of the script must be submitted to the network for approval and/or recommendations for change. If revisions are requested, the script is rewritten or slightly modified and resubmitted for approval. This process continues until the script is approved. Approval signals the activation of the production phase. Space, equipment and costumes are rented, the cast is selected, and production meetings are held. The program is then filmed or taped over a period of approximately three to five days. Each show in a package must go through the above development and production procedures.

After the show is produced, it is aired on network television where it is evaluated in terms of its Nielsen ratings. If the ratings are high, the network will probably decide to buy another 13-16 week program package and may consider rerunning the previous package. If a special receives high ratings, it may be decided to develop it into a series. Low ratings usually mean cancellation of the show after the 13-16 week package has been aired. Although a show may be cancelled early in the season, the entire package that was purchased is broadcasted.

Several attributes of the model were selected for analysis. Development and Production personnel include: an executive producer who manages and oversees the entire project, writers, technical advisors, a production

manager, a director, a production crew (wardrobe, lighting, sets, makeup, etc.) and a cast. All are fairly well differentiated in terms of skills. Training generally takes place on the job or in an applied setting. Talent and experience are the basic criteria for employment.

Desired outcomes are usually specified prior to development and they are generally clear cut. Outcomes such as high ratings, higher sales for the sponsor, and series renewal for the development organization are quantifiable and therefore success in achieving these goals can be measured. If the program is designed to impart moral messages such as "thou shalt not steal, lie, cheat, etc." this is also specified prior to development, but no criteria are established to determine if and how these messages are received and interpreted.

There is a recognized technology which supports the technical aspects of production and there are general guidelines for the writing phase. However, research and development in the children's commercial television industry generally lacks a scientific base. Professional judgment is most often based on intuition and past experience which also influences the analysis of survey data and ratings.

Programming alternatives are considered over time in relation to demands on the system and reactions (ratings) to products disseminated. This is especially true since the system is so competitive. For example, rather than trying to revise a show that has been cancelled, new alternative ideas are considered for marketing.

There is some formative evaluation of the product, but it does not involve pilot or field testing of the product on a sample of the target population. Occasionally, a program is pilot tested by a network but this is to gather statistics that might be needed to sell a program to a

sponsor. Formative evaluation is basically an informal process which relies on the intuition, experiences and opinions of writers, producers, sponsors, and studio and network executives.

Summative evaluation is conducted via the Nielsen rating which serves as field test data for the product. Based on these ratings, decisions are made to either cancel a series, buy another package and/or show reruns, and in the case of a special, to develop a new series.

Unfortunately, there is little or no empirical research conducted to determine possible negative side effects or unanticipated outcomes of programs disseminated.

The analysis of the R & D practices employed by at least the segment of the children's commercial television industry investigated, provides several implications for education.

First, several research issues are in need of attention. Since their effect on the socialization process is so great, both the television industry and the educational R & D community must commit more resources to evaluating the impact of their products on children and society. Research also needs to be conducted into the substance of the moral and social messages (overt and covert) actually being transmitted by products. Also, those attributes of a product which capture and hold the attention of different types of children need to be better defined.

Second, educational development might benefit from the style of management found in the children's commercial television industry. Continuity and coordination is well served by having an executive producer with managerial, marketing, and technical competence overseeing all phases of development, marketing and production. (S)he is a decision-maker with a broad perspective.

Third, more emphasis should be placed on assessment of market, consumer and interest group wants and needs when determining the substance and type of educational product to be developed. This could result in a more efficient use of scarce resources and a wider range of effective products. Short-term commitments to alternative ideas for products in the initial stages of development might facilitate this end as well.

Finally, there is a need to better operationalize the skill and knowledge competencies required of various educational R & D personnel for use in determining criteria for employment and for establishing training objectives. Training would probably be enhanced if it were conducted at least partially in an applied setting.

The description of the R & D practices employed by the children's commercial television industry contained in this paper, was derived from an investigation of only a small portion of that industry's R & D community. Since the purpose of this paper was to discover the implications for education, of another discipline's R & D practices, not to provide a complete and comprehensive account of those R & D practices, there may be exceptions to the model that has been described.